Born Again
John 21:1-17
April 24, 1977

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One of the season's most talked-about books is Charles Colson's Born Again. Colson, you will recall, was former President Nixon's assistant, advisor, strategist and loyal friend. In his book he tells a very candid and straight-forward story. A nominal Episcopalian, Colson regarded religion as a pleasant ritual, but had no time nor taste for its intracasies. God was a vague, detached abstraction: Jesus a remote historical figure whose teachings were admirable. Charles Colson's world was the real world of White House politics in which he earned a reputation for intense loyalty and the willingness to do whatever necessary to guard, promote and protect the President. After the landslide 1972 election victory Colson felt drained. Sitting at the very pinacle of power, he felt somehow empty, drifting: there was no sense of completeness and accomplishment at the very moment he should have been enjoying the fulfillment of his noblest dream.

The murmurings of something called Watergate were beginning to be heard across the land and Colson knew intuitively that he would be drawn into it. About that time he renewed a friendship with a New England industrialist who had become an articulate and devoted, evangelical Christian. Colson's instincts led him to be skeptical, at first, but his friend's conspicuous sense of peace and purpose were all too visible in contrast to his own grim state of depression. Thus began Charles Colson's now famous conversion which, according to his testimony, enabled him to live through the harrowing months of hearings, trials and jail sentences.

Colson is no theologian and doesn't claim to be. The book, nevertheless, is powerful: it is difficult to challenge the author's sincerity, even if one wanted to. The result of his conversion was a life dramatically changed, a whole new outlook, a very admirable commitment to prison reform; in short - a rebirth.

It is also a disturbing book. Church people, particularly, feel somewhat uncomfortable when confronted with dramatic conversion experiences whether they happened in the life of a Presidential Assistant, or at the behest of the evangelists whose goal is to make them happen. The reason for the discomfort is simply that a dramatic incident has a way of becoming normative - "If that's the way it was for him, then it should be that way for me." One man's experience, even though Colson doesn't say it this way, becomes the criterion for every religious experience.

Presbyterians, more than others perhaps, are part of a tradition which, while not discounting the dramatic conversion experience, moves in another direction. Becoming a Christian is a process of growing which happens, ordinarily, in the church. Beginning in infancy and childhood, for most of us, it is a becoming, not an event, punctuated by many decisions made over the years. We have said, and continue to maintain, that it is not necessary to be able to point to the date and time of that one decision which brought one over the line into the Kingdom of God. In fact, while there may be a place for the dramatic conversion, our concern - our direction - is the disciplined, quiet, not always dramatic, exposure to the grace of God in Jesus Christ as it is lived and celebrated in the Church.

It is singularly unfortunate, although no fault of the author, that people who have been faithful Christians: generous, sacrificial, helpful, accepting, witnessing to their faith through steadfast loyalty to the church, are somehow made to feel inadequate because they have not experienced what Mr. Colson experienced.

Thus several sermons, this morning and later in May, on the topic of conversion, rebirth and what those terms might mean to us. Today I would begin with the story found in the 21st chapter of the Gospel according to John, the story - I think - of a man Born Again.

Have you ever walked along the sea shore in the very early morning? There is nothing quite like it. The breakers seem quieter, the air is incredibly fresh, moist, aromatic and still very cool. The beach is littered with the early tide's delivery of shells, mussels; the only irregular sound is the occasional squawk of an early gull. It's misty, sometimes almost impossible to see where the sky ends and ocean begins. It is very conducive for reflection, for thinking about the simple fact that it has been like this for millions of years, for putting one's own concerns back into proper perspective.

I imagine it a morning like that on the Sea of Galilee, known also as the Sea of Tiberius. About one hundred yards off shore seven men were in a boat fishing, silent, barely visible in that gray mist. The seven had returned recently from Jerusalem to their familiar sea. Just a few weeks before they had followed Jesus to the city. They had watched his steady pilgrimage to the cross: watched as he broke bread in a strangely moving way, watched as he was arrested and tried. From a distance they had watched him die. And then, on the first day of the week they had experienced something so mysterious, so incredible that they still couldn't talk about it: they knew he was alive. These were no ordinary fishermen. They had returned to Galilee to think and wait and experience the therapy of the familiar - boat, ropes, sails, net, hard work.

A voice from the beach broke the silence: "Have you caught anything yet? Try the other side." They had not noticed the man, but it was not an uncommon exchange. Shoals of fish are visible from the shore in the early light of dawn. John recognized him: "It is the Lord." And Peter, without thinking jumped out of the boat, stumbled, swam through the surf. "Was it Jesus? Was John right?" He had to know: he had to see first: nothing else mattered, and the others pulled in the net and dragged it to shore.

A fire had been started: fish were cooking and he had a loaf of bread. He invited them to add a few of the fish they had caught and to join him for breakfast. So they broke bread together, and the memory of that last supper burned in each heart. None dared speak: each thought about what he had done or not done after that last meal. There were no apologies that could erase the fact of their desertion. The first word would have to be his.

"Simon, son of John: do you love me more than these?" He had unfinished business to complete with Peter. The spokesman, unofficial leader, strong, impetuous, first always to speak and act, first also to see that he was the Christ, it was Peter who had protested vehemently at the last supper that even if everyone else fell away he would die before he denied Jesus. It was Peter who drew a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and would have fought it out on the spot. When the rest slipped into the shadows it was Peter alone who followed into the courtyard of the building where Jesus was questioned. "You were one of them," a little girl had said. He wasn't prepared for that. His response was reflexive, instinctive: he denied it. Three times during that long and agonizing night the question came. Three times he denied that he knew Jesus, the last time punctuating it with an obscenity. When the soldiers led Jesus out of the house I have always imagined that his eyes met Peter's: and that this strong, big man was devastated by his own hypocrisy and cowardice.

I can understand Peter. I see him in other people and myself. One moment he believed passionately; the next moment he was filled with indifference. Prepared to die for his convictions in the abstract, he was as self-seeking as the next person when the moment of decision came. Like most of the people I know Peter lived somewhere between his best and worst self, cultivating the highest ideals and standards in his mind and constantly missing the mark in his life. He had failed again. He had denied his Lord. And so he jumped out of the boat and stumbled through the water with tears streaming down his cheeks, tears of guilt and joy, and then he stood dumbly staring at the sand and shells and fish and bread.

"Do you love me, Peter, more than these?" More than what? More than fishing, and salt air and good friends? More than these others love me? We don't know for sure. Peter had denied Jesus three times and so the question came three times. Our poverty of language disguises the impact of this dialogue. As you know, there are several Greek words which are translated "love." In the first two questions Jesus used agape, self-sacrificing, divine love. Peter answered with filia, affectionate, friendly love. An alternate, and perhaps better reading is:

> Peter, do you love me more than all else?
> Yes, Lord, you know that I am your friend.
> Then feed my lambs.

In the third question Jesus uses Peter's word:

> Peter, are you my friend?
> Lord, you know everything.
> You know I am your friend.
> (See New English Bible, footnote to John 21:13-17)

The dialogue ends here and I would submit that it constitutes Peter's rebirth. What I think Peter was saying was this: "Despite my weakness, my denial, despite my foolish boasting and my impulsive, thoughtless behavior, despite my faults, Lord, I do love you. You alone know how deeply I love. You alone know that I don't always say what I mean or mean what I say. You alone know that I am a better, bigger man than I have yet been."

Jesus didn't criticize Peter. He had failed miserably, but Jesus did not condemn him. Peter was born again, I think, when on that beach he learned the difficult lesson that he was capable of dishonesty and cowardice. When he was forced to confront his own worst self and the fact that Jesus loved him none the less. Peter learned that the only standing he had in the eyes of his Lord was based, not on his own shameful performance, but on Christ's steady love for him. His rebirth was in the miracle of grace: even though guilty he was acquitted: acquitted, forgiven, accepted, loved and set free. He was born again: a new and bigger and better man than he had ever been before - because he had encountered the divine confidence and love - which we call grace - that Jesus Christ had for him.

I can't simply discount Peter's discipleship prior to that experience, however. I can't conclude that he was not a Christian, unsaved to use the popular contemporary catch-phrase. Even for Peter, the matter of following Jesus Christ was a process of growing. The experience on the beach was part of the process, even as you and I have known experiences in which our faith was confirmed and for one bright moment in time we were sure. But those experiences are not the norm:

they do not occur with regularity - unless we manufacture them. The ambiguity of life is always right outside the door of the church, and unless we isolate ourselves, hiding behind a veneer of piety and sanctimonious cliches, we will know daily the need for the process of rebirth to continue as long as we live.

Peter was reborn, became a whole and new person when he accepted the fact that Jesus loved him; that in spite of his denial Jesus had confidence in him. Thanks to a whole new emphasis in popular psychology we are learning that the Gospel of grace is not simply sentimental and naive. We are learning, for instance, that a major emotional problem for a lot of people, perhaps even most people, is a lack of self esteem. Our culture itself seems to be based on the premise that esteem for others and for self must be predicated on performance. We are not "OK" by nature; if we are to be loved and valued we must do something to be lovable and valuable. And so we develop a plan: those dreams and hopes and goals by which we will achieve the right to be esteemed. ("Evan if everyone falls away, I won't deny you, Lord!") But we never quite make the grade. We stumble and fall short and sometimes fail terribly. And as the tension between the plan and the reality of self increases, self esteem weakens. If we fail gloriously enough, we will not be able to stand ourselves.

If a person has no self esteem, he or she will find it very difficult to have esteem for others - any others. If we are not sure of ourselves, we will look frantically for chinks in the armor of the other: friendship becomes lethal competition. Or to use the idiom of scripture, you will not love your neighbor until you learn to love the person who is yourself.

The Good News of the Gospel is just this: your worth as an individual does not hang on the thread of your accomplishments, station in life, money in the bank, success, integrity or piety. If it did, even the best of us would be in occasional trouble. The Good News is that your right to esteem yourself hangs only on the fact that in Jesus Christ God loves you and values you and has confidence in you and sees more in you than you ever dared see in yourself. In spite of your failures - your denials.

Peter was born again when he experienced that and accepted it and began to live it. He heard the Gospel, perhaps for the first time, as he felt the grace of Jesus Christ accept him, when he had nothing to offer in return but the memory of three denials. Peter was born again and, in fact, lived as a whole and honest man of God and died a courageous saint.

Born Again: It seems that the people who use the phrase most consistently, regard it as the goal of religion. "Souls saved" are counted up and recorded like base hits at a ball game. Rebirth is touted, marketed and promoted as the end, that blessed state of bliss conferred on an individual for his or her enjoyment. The popular mark of one who has been reborn under those conditions is a sense of peace and joy, a feeling of salvation.

That's not in the Bible. What is - is this:

Do you love me?
I love you.
Feed my sheep.

That's the purpose of the Gospel. That's what God has been up to across the centuries: the feeding of his sheep. However you wish to interpret that

rejoiner, one thing is clear: rebirth is authenticated when other people benefit from it.

Peter was born again when he learned that too: when he realized that the greatest truth the Gospel has added to the life of the world is that real life is living for others: that all the meaning and satisfaction and joy and peace a person needs will derive from feeding the lambs of Jesus Christ.

Simon, Son of John, do you love me?
Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
Then feed my sheep.

Amen.

Thank you, Father, for love big enough to encompass our failures. Thank you for a love strong enough to include even our denials. Thank you, Father, for the freedom to live confidently: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.